



FORGING LEADERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: STRENGTHS-BASED AND VALUE-BASED  
STUDENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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## **Forging Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Strengths-based and Value-based Student Leadership Development**

### **ABSTRACT**

Leadership skills are critical yet undeveloped or unmet in contemporary organizations, despite the rating by employers of leadership as pivotal for future employees graduating from U.S. institutions of higher education. In a strategic, targeted effort to address this gap, a private 4-year research and teaching university located in California, United States, developed an applied leadership program experience for its first-year business students. The overarching program objective were to build the confidence, character and courage of student to lead more successfully across multiple domains (academic, personal and professional). Two components of the program include Strengths-based leadership and Value-based leadership. The first program cohort was successfully launched in spring 2018 (January – May 2018) with 63 participants, who engaged in seminars and experiential activities to increase their effectiveness as leaders by building on strengths, practicing leadership skills, and getting coaching and feedback from trained faculty and peer mentors. Evaluation results of the Program were highly positive, showing growth in self-reported knowledge, skill and confidence in understanding and application of leadership strengths and values. This study provides an overview of the Program goals, learning objectives, components, marketing and recruitment, and findings which support student leadership development in preparing future leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership development programs, assessment, strengths-based leadership, values-based leadership

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership skills have been identified as one of the most critical for sustainable competitive advantage, yet underdeveloped in contemporary organizations (Wagner, 2014; Deloitte, 2014; The Conference Board, 2006). According to a recent Conference Board report (2006), nearly 82% of employers rate leadership as “very important” for those coming out of four-year college programs. Thirty-eight percent of respondents in a recent Deloitte survey (2014) on global human capital rated building global leadership as an *urgent* issue to address to remain competitive. However, employers do not feel that recent college graduates possess the necessary skills for workplace success including several aspects of leadership capacity such as working in teams, communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving, and ethical judgment and decision making (Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), 2015).

Colleges and universities continue to play a central role in preparing our nation’s leaders. In a dynamic, diverse and competitive global environment, institutions of higher education play a vital role in educating future leaders who can solve complex problems facing organizations and society (Astin & Astin, 2000; Caster-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Kouzes & Posner, 2014; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000). University graduates may not have the necessary leadership skills to identify and solve the complex problems in the workplace and as a result may negatively impact an organization’s performance (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs & Fleishman, 2000). This is increasingly the case as leadership and management responsibilities are being pushed down to lower levels in the organization where recent graduates begin their careers (Mumford et al., 2000).

Schools who do not pay attention to developing their students into global leaders risk becoming marginalized as relevant institutions of learning which is especially true for business schools that identify developing leaders as part of their mission. Their graduates who are not developing the skill set to manage in a global and diverse workplace will not be prime candidates for employers who rely on schools and colleges to prepare students to enter the workforce (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). Furthermore, those graduates may not have the necessary leadership skills to identify and solve the complex problems in the workplace and as a result may negatively impact the organization's performance (Mumford et al., 2000). Successful employment rates and the performance of recent graduates (student and alumni outcomes) influence a school's reputation and ability to attract students and funding. (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole & Perez, 1998; Pascarella, 2001).

In response to this demand, a 4-year, private undergraduate business institution located in California, USA, henceforth referred to as "The Business School", developed a unique applied leadership program, referred to as "The Undergraduate Leadership Program (ULP)", funded by a private donor. Targeting first-year business students, the multi-faceted program was designed to help undergraduates develop the self-confidence and skills needed to become effective and ethical leaders. An integrated series of classroom discussions, experiential learning, personal assessments, mentoring, and peer coaching are delivered as part of their business core program. Through intellectual enquiry and reflection on experience, students build their knowledge about leadership, come to identify themselves as leaders, and build the competence and moral courage required to lead in any context. Currently, students self-enroll but the program is expected to be mandatory for all first year students by 2020.

This research study will discuss the program evaluation results of the first formal cohort (N=63) delivered in spring 2017. Our corpus includes assessment data collected after each seminar and breakout as well as two months after the end of the program. We analyzed and evaluated program effectiveness, measured student/participant progress in understanding and development of leadership skills, identified key areas for improvement, and are in the process of refining curriculum components for subsequent program implementation and modification.

This paper proceeds using the following key premises, that:

- 1) Leadership is a skill that can be learned: several leadership scholars assert leadership can be learned and is within the reach of everyone (Bennis, 2009; Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013; Kouzes & Posner, 2014);
- 2) Leadership development programs must begin early in the academic lifecycle and contain repetitive skill development to drive application (Dugan, 2006); and
- 3) There are components of knowledge, practice, reflection and coaching that may be applicable to both academic and non-academic organizations to integrate into their own leadership programs (Day, 2001; Mumford et al., 2000).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Leadership Skills***

While there is no definitive list of leadership skills to be a successful leader, there are core “leadership attributes” that should be addressed in an effective leadership program. Leaders need to be able to communicate effectively, work collaboratively, influence others, understand the hierarchical nature of group dynamics as well as understand leadership in shared, non-positional roles, and possess a purpose and a passion to challenge themselves and others to meet

clear goals (CAS, 2012; Komives et al., 2009; Komives et al., 2005; Northouse, 2015; Watt, 2003). It is necessary that future leaders possess the competencies characteristic of collaborative and relational leadership needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as critical-thinking, communication, and team-building skills.

Leaders set vision and create the structures necessary to align individuals' purpose, identity and mastery with the desired results for the organization (Moran & Brightman, 2000). Effective leaders serve not only as role models but need to constantly and consistently communicate a compelling case for change (Moran & Brightman, 2000; Northouse, 2015).

Fundamental to executing these skills effectively is the self-awareness of one's own strengths. Grounded in strengths-based leadership theory (Burkus, 2010; Rath and Conchie; Goleman 2006; Welch, Grossaint, Riggio et al., xxx), a strength "is defined as the ability to exhibit near-perfect performance consistently in a given activity" (Burkus, 2010). While weaknesses are considered, the primary focus is on building talents and strengths of individuals and minimizing challenges. To do so, individuals must first be clear about their own strengths (via assessment tools), and be empowered to delegate areas of weakness to others who have greater skills or talents in those facets. A subsequent benefit to employers of hiring based on the strengths-based approach, is the development of more effective leaders who acknowledge and further refine their strengths as "leadership enablers" (Maps, 2016), and progression of teams with more diverse, robust skill sets, attitudes, and talents.

### ***Student Leadership Development***

Leadership development involves activities that build individual skills, knowledge, and abilities related to leadership roles, organizational processes and goal attainment (Day, 2001;

Day & Harrison, 2007). University students are best served by the post-industrial view of leadership as a dynamic process which recognizes collaboration, ethical action, moral purpose and the ability to develop others' leadership capacity as central to being an effective leader (Burns, 1978; Covey, 1992; Northouse, 2015; Rost, 1993; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000).

Student leadership development is most effective when students learn over time, operationalize through practice, and receive feedback and support (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Student leader identity development defines a student's progression from viewing leadership as a position or role-based authority to a more collaborative and relational process of influence (Komives et.al, 2005). Students build self-confidence and self-efficacy as leaders by applying new leadership knowledge and skills in challenging new situations while getting feedback from others and in the form of self-reflection, (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Komives et al., 2005; Lord & Hall, 2005). Various self and group influences such as interactions with peers and adults, meaningful involvement and reflective practice shape a student's view of leadership and their leader identity (Komives et al., 2005). Programs that provide students with leadership theories and frameworks give students a new language that when combined with meaningful experiences, furthers their development as leaders (CAS, 2012; Komives et al., 2005; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000). The success of a program also relies on student commitment to learning, practice and peer coaching.

Students who invest the time and effort in leadership development may benefit from self-awareness and self-improvement as a result of new knowledge and reflection (Azdell, 2010; Goleman, 1998). Subsequently, students can be more self-directed in their career and personal development as well as make greater contributions to organizations' goals (Azdell, 2010). The

ULP was designed around a framework of strengths-based and values-based leadership combined with peer coaching sessions over the course of eight weeks in the spring semester. The program culminates in a experiential capstone and celebration.

### ***Measuring Efficacy: Assessment and Evaluation of Leadership Programs***

There is an increased focus on measuring learning and developmental outcomes in colleges and universities (AACSB, 2013; Astin, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). High-quality leadership development programs engage in regular assessment of program learning objectives and goals to ensure accountability (Goertzen, 2009; Owen, 2011, 2012; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000). In order to know if students are in fact gaining leadership knowledge, skill and ability, researchers propose there should be direct and indirect formal assessment of students' abilities as authentic and credible measures (Ewell, 2002; Goetzman, 2009; Palomba & Banta, 1999).

However, notes Eich (2008), there exists a lack of empirical evidence of leadership program quality and curriculum activities that impact student leadership development. Further complicating assessment is when instruments not designed to measure gains in leadership knowledge, skill and ability -- such as Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the Emotional Intelligent Leadership For Students Inventory (EILS) and Gallup's StrengthsFinder 2.0 -- are misused as proxies for outcome measures when the leadership traits, styles and attributes they measure theoretically do not change (Owen, 2011). Alternatively, Owen presents a variety of different assessment tools to assess and evaluate leadership programs on different attributes, including:



- Attendance and participation is often overlooked as a simple method of data collection that can reflect student interest and engagement in classroom sessions and program activities (Owen, 2011).
- Faculty can develop their own survey to measure changes in student needs, expectations, perceptions and practices or rely on national multi-institution surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) to form a leadership practices construct from existing data (Owen, 2011; Zimmerman-Oster, 2000; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000).
- Faculty can also assess student's leadership capacity and growth by reviewing leadership portfolios, journals, general tests and quizzes on knowledge during the program (Owen, 2011; Roberts, 2007).

Additionally, national studies and reports such as the Multi-Institution Study of Leadership (MSL), the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and the National Clearinghouse of Leadership Programs (NCLP) have attempted to identify factors and methods to assess changes in student leadership capacity. These measures can be adopted or incorporated into institutional-specific measures of program effectiveness. The ULP utilizes a cross-representation of these attributes.

### **THE UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM (ULP)**

In 2015, a philanthropist and business executive issued “The Business School” a challenge: develop a robust applied leadership program for undergraduate business students to be more confident and courageous to challenge business decisions and exert leadership behavior earlier in their careers. Over an one-year period, a small team of management and organization faculty created a program proposal to present to the donor and senior school administrators. The

program in its current format was launched in Spring 2018 after segments were tested in two small workshops in Fall 2016, and in an elective course in Spring 2017.

The objective of the ULP is three-fold: first, to build an individual's confidence, character and courage through the process of gaining self-awareness; second, leveraging self-awareness as a direct contributor to self-confidence; and finally, to promote self-efficacy in implementing leadership skills. This is achieved through a detailed focus on creating intention, developing influence, and ultimately having an impact as a leader. The underlying assumption with the program is predicated on the idea that every individual already has a natural set of strengths (a "disposition"), which, through leadership training and repeated application, can become actualized talents that maximize their leadership performance. These "dispositions" are measured through a series of assessments that include Clifton StrengthsFinder ([gallupstrengthscenter.com](http://gallupstrengthscenter.com)) to identify top talent/strength themes, while values are explored through VIA Character Strengths ([viacharacter.org](http://viacharacter.org)). The use of the assessments provide a foundation for initial awareness of what students' natural talents may be and how to develop the competence to build confidence, character and courage to enact their leadership.

### ***Program Goals/Objectives***

Through the process of the program and curriculum, students are asked to assume that they can, with knowledge, guidance and application, become more effective leaders. Students participate in a highly interactive and collaborative program in order to achieve the following program goals:

1. Help students develop their leader identity and see leadership as a disposition, not a position

2. Enable students to identify and develop strengths and values related to their role in leadership including personal and organizational decision-making
3. Build student self-confidence, character, and courage to motivate students to lead
4. Introduce roles, tasks, and responsibilities of leaders at all levels
5. Build future leaders who make a difference

### ***Program Components/Curriculum***

The program relied on an instructional scaffolding framework to introduce and subsequently develop skills using instruction, modeling, practice and coaching (Palincsar, 1986).

Delivered over the course of eight weeks, the program consists of the following components:

- Strengths-based Leadership Seminar, followed by Breakout session (4 hours)
- Values-based Leadership Seminar, followed by Breakout session (4 hours)
- Two Cohort meetings (90 minutes each)
- Capstone Experience and Closing (3 hours)

Prior to each Seminar, students completed manageable pre-work assignments which includes a self-assessment (Clifton StrengthsFinder, VIA Character Strengths), and short readings. The assessments generated a report that students brought to the program sessions to use as reference during different learning or practice activities. See Appendix A for Program Timing.

### ***Program Marketing and Recruitment***

Strategic marketing directed towards recruitment for the ULP was oriented towards three stakeholder audiences: Student participants, Student Mentors, and ULP Faculty. The communication approach varied based on audience type, access to communication mediums, and timing.

## **Student/Participant Recruitment**

Marketing to attract students to enroll in the program was multi-modal and included digital displays in the business school buildings, information sessions, targeted emails to first-year students, and tabling events in public areas. The program academic director sent requests to faculty teaching undergraduate core courses to post ULP information on their LMS course site. Academic advisors were also requested to promote the program during mandatory advising sessions held in late fall.

Marketing communications touted specific benefits to the program participants such as focused and personalized leadership training and development, interview and internship readiness, and increased performance and productivity.

## **Student Mentor Recruitment and Training**

Student mentor coaches assumed a very specific set of roles, with an extensive amount of training prior to the launch of the ULP student/participants seminars and workshops/breakout sessions. Their primary roles were to facilitate breakout sessions and lead cohort meetings, as well as serve as primary conduits of information and motivation for student participants between program seminars/workshops. Mentors were originally solicited via mass-communication notices published on broadcast screens in “The Business School” primary building (where most undergraduates take their courses). In addition, the ULP Core Administrator sent emails to core undergraduate program faculty, asking for assistance in posting solicitation announcements to the Learning Management System (LMS) as course announcements. Finally, academic advisors in “The Business School” Student Advising and Student Services were asked for recommendations. Mentors were recruited based on their responses to a detailed application, a

target GPA (3.3 on a 4.0 scale), leadership ability and involvement in extracurriculars with a leadership orientation, and coaching and mentoring skills (either demonstrated or indicative of an aptitude to learn). prior internship or work experience was not considered.

A full-day training session for all was held on a Saturday (December 2016) to educate student mentors using the program curriculum in strengths-based and values-based leadership. Students also received training in mentoring and active listening as well as the GROW model of coaching and mentoring (Alexander, 2006). The training session was interactive with time to practice skills. Another preparation meeting was held one week before program launch in January 2017 to review skills and program content so student mentors felt competent and confident in assisting in the breakout sessions.

### **Faculty Recruitment and Training**

The Faculty facilitator role was originally established to lead the five cohort breakout sessions immediately following the initial seminar. The program academic director selected the initial group of four faculty facilitators based on their leadership experience in teaching leadership and/or ethics and interest in being part of the the pilot program. The faculty team represented professors from the Management and Organization as well as the Business Communications academic departments at “The Business School”.

An initial two-part faculty training (4 hours) was held in early and mid-January 2017 to discuss their assessment results, review lecture materials, discuss facilitation of in-class activities during breakout sessions, and address any questions regarding classroom management. Prior to these training sessions, ULP faculty had completed both the CliftonStrengths Finder and VIA Character Survey to identify their strengths/talents and values.

The primary faculty role was to facilitate the breakout sessions that occurred immediately after the primary Seminars. The original intent was to have the faculty serve as primary facilitators during the Breakout, with secondary assistance from Student Mentors as needed and determined by the Faculty. This approach evolved into more of a hybrid model during the breakout sessions, with Faculty facilitators taking different approaches to managing their mentor engagement: in three of the five cohorts, the faculty facilitator had student mentors take the lead for facilitating or co-facilitating content in the breakout sessions.

### ***Strengths-Based Leadership Seminar & Breakout Session (4 hours)***

The overall objective of these applied workshops was to: 1) discuss talents and how to turn them into strengths; 2) give students opportunities as individuals and in teams to identify how they can operationalize their strengths and 3) operationalize improving their individual strengths/talents via several exercises/co-facilitation with Student mentors.

This first component of the ULP used the Clifton StrengthsFinder, based on the idea that “productivity more than anything else is a matter of helping people become, not what they might have been, but becoming more of what they already are.” (Clifton, 1998). The results assessed individuals on 34 categories of “strengths” or talents, although for purposes of the ULP, students only received their top five strengths as this was deemed sufficient for training purposes.

### ***Strengths-Based Leadership: Seminar***

On Friday, January 26, 2018, 63 students participated in a 2-hour Strengths-Based Leadership Seminar, followed by a 2-hour Breakout session. The first two hours was led by the program academic director, a professor in the management department with expertise in student leadership development. Both sessions are predicated on individual students’ results from the

Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, which is based on the idea that “productivity more than anything else is a matter of helping people become, not what they might have been, but becoming more of what they already are.” (Clifton, 1998). The results assess individuals on 34 categories of “strengths” or talents, although for purposes of the ULP, students only received their top five strengths as this was deemed sufficient for training purposes.

In the Seminar, students were introduced to the concept of StrengthsFinder and its overview of strengths and performance, as well as the Four Domains of Leadership (executing, influencing, relationship building, strategic thinking) (Clifton, Anderson & Schreiner, 2006; Rath & Conchie, 2008). The first session was intended to help students understand their own Top Five strengths and start to build a vocabulary of strengths-based approach to spotting talent in others.

#### *Strengths-Based Leadership: Breakout Session*

Following the seminar, students participated in pre-grouped Breakout Sessions, co-facilitated by Faculty and Student Mentors. As requested by the donor, the program moved quickly into application. During this two-hour session, students engaged in a variety of individual and collaborative activities in small groups, allowing them to identify precisely when and how their individual strengths manifest within the activity, and to start to spot strengths in others. The highly-interactive activities include: a tower-building exercise with provided materials (paper clips, note cards), completion and sharing of a “Strengths Mind Map” and “Strengths Wheel” which asks them to link a specific strength (from their designated five) to a goal and action plan. In pairs with an assigned *accountability buddy*, students discuss how they will apply their Top Five Strengths to achieve the goal. Together, students create strategies and accountability checkpoints to support each other. The breakout session concludes with a

collective activity during which teams are asked to provide their top five takeaways from the session and create a visual image to best express their chosen themes.

These exercises and activities reinforced the ideas behind “Name it, Claim it, Aim it”: students learn to appreciate the power and opportunities that their dominant themes give them (Name), coupled with the responsibility to develop them (Claim), and then intentionally develop their talents and take specific actions to achieve goals and better response to everyday situations (Aim). This approach is of particular benefit to emerging leaders, who have to leverage individual strengths to achieve goals individual, team and organizational goals.

#### *Strengths-Based Leadership Cohort Meeting*

Two weeks after the SBL Seminar, students met in their cohort groups, comprised of the same group from the breakout session. Led solely by Student Mentors, this 90-minute session provided support for students to further their understanding of their strengths (Claim) and application of their strengths to their goals (Aim). Students “published” their Strengths Wheel on the whiteboard and discussed in triads how their Top 5 strengths are used to set specific daily, weekly and monthly steps to achieve their goal. For the second half of the session, students were instructed in active learning and practiced the skill with a partner discussing a current challenge and how they could use their strengths to effectively seek a solution. These interactive exercises provided the practice and coaching to further develop the self-awareness, skill and confidence central to effective leadership.

#### ***Values-Based Leadership Seminar & Breakout Session (4 hours)***

##### *Values-Based Leadership Seminar*



On March 2, 2018, 57 students returned to participate in the 2-hour Values-based Leadership (VBL) Seminar and subsequent 2-hour VBL Breakout session. The VBL seminar focused on increasing students' awareness and skill in ethical leadership by focusing on navigating difficult or challenging situations. Prior to the session, students took the Values in Action (VIA) Survey of Character Strengths that is designed to assess 24 character strengths within six universal virtues. The virtues – including wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence as examples – were identified as core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers across time and world cultures (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and have been determined to be universal across cultures, nations and belief systems (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005; Park et al., 2006). These elements can combine to form complex character strengths that influence a person's choices with regard to leadership behavior and ethical decision-making. Because different situations reveal and shape character strengths (Schwartz and Sharpe 2006), the VIA survey was used in conjunction with two frameworks of managing ethical or difficult situations to give students practice in order to develop the skill and courage to exercise their strengths effectively and for good cause.

The VBL seminar curriculum included a brief introduction the Giving Voice to Values (GVV) approach and the Crucial Conversations model of honest dialogue that promotes ethical exploration and implementation of effective action. The Crucial Conversations model provides a practical and prescriptive approach for first year undergraduates to answer the questions asked in GVV - "What if I were going to act on my values? What would I say and do? How could I be most effective?" (Gentile, 2010). Students take this knowledge into the breakout session to practice skills needed to manage ethical challenges and difficult conversations that arise in

working with and leading others across a broad domain of personal, professional and academic settings.

#### *Values-Based Leadership: Breakout Session*

The VBL breakout sessions followed the same format at the breakouts for the Strengths-based Leadership session. Immediately following the seminar, five separate cohorts of approximately 10 students each met to deepen their understanding of their character strengths, share successful and unsuccessful experiences of voicing and acting on their values, and practice using the Crucial Conversations model as a framework to be more effective enacting their values in challenging situations. Participants analyzed a real life case of a student-oriented ethical challenge adapted from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University (Santa Clara University, n.d.). The case analysis utilized the GVV approach to seek reasons and rationalization of all stakeholders, identify levers and tactics, and pre-script and practice with coaching to provide the opportunity for students to build competence to take action in order to speak up, the pivotal moment to voice our values. Students utilized the Crucial Conversations model as a tool in this process. The breakout session concluded with students creating a personal action plan to tackle a crucial conversation or challenge using the newly acquired skills and knowledge of their character strengths. Students were provided with worksheets to assist in their planning.

#### *Values-Based Leadership: Cohort Meeting*

The VBL cohort meeting was held three weeks after the VBL seminar to accommodate spring break. The final meeting of the program was led by Student Mentors focused on reviewing character strengths as well as the GVV and Crucial Conversations frameworks.

Student mentors led a debrief session where students related their experiences over the interim identifying how they managed a variety of different situations relying on their character strengths and the GVV and Crucial Conversations models. Mentors led another case discussion where students were able to engage in perspective taking and scripting to further practice their skills and receive peer coaching from both mentors and fellow participants. In this way, student participants and mentors further their ability to exercise these leadership skills. Again stressing practical application, the session ended with students creating an action plan to continue to put their strengths and new skills to work to build the confidence, character and courage to step up and lead. Students were encouraged to identify sources of continued support such as staying in touch with student mentors and accountability buddies, journaling, using reminders to practice and reflect on their strengths, and using the resources posted on the program website.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To assess the effectiveness and program gaps of the initial spring 2018 ULP implementation and outcomes of the program, the ULP Leadership/Administrative Office distributed three surveys to student participants at various junctures, comprising pre- and post-collection data. The intent of the surveys was to measure student knowledge transfer, correlation to learning objectives, and increase in skills development. Additionally, student mentor and faculty effectiveness was evaluated.

The three surveys included the following:

1. A post-Strengths-based leadership Seminar/Breakout Session survey  
(administered on January 26, 2018)

2. A post-Values-based Leadership Seminar/Breakout Session survey (administered on March 2, 2018)
3. A post-program/end-of-program survey (administered in May 2018, two months after the conclusion of the Values-based Seminar and Cohort Meeting)

### ***Strengths-based leadership Survey***

The SBL Survey contained eight total questions, and was designed to address five main categories in an individual's development of leadership skills: 1) their knowledge of the strengths-based learning approach to leadership; 2) their knowledge of their top five themes and strengths/talents, as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment; 3) their understanding of how to apply their strengths to achieve their goals; 4) their ability to recognize the strengths of others (strength-spotting); and 5) their level of confidence as a leader.

Respondents were asked to rate their post-SBL development across a Likert scale of 1 - 4, with 4 equaling a "very high level", 3 equating to a "moderate level"; 2 equalling a "low level", and 1 indicating "none or not at all" to any degree. These questions were targeted to measure to what degree students understood the program components/curriculum, were able to apply the targeted learning objectives (knowledge development, self-awareness of themes/strengths), understood how to link their strength to goal-orientation and achievement, if they could recognize strengths in others as part of team collaboration and effective leadership skills of delegating what they might not excel in, and if their confidence as a leader increased.

In addition, students were asked to rate their responses to the following three questions: 1) their belief that the program would have positive individual benefits for them as a leader; 2) whether they would seek feedback on their top five themes and strengths/talents; and 3) practical

application of what they had learned in the Seminar/Breakout session to make an impact on a team, organization or within their job. The Likert rating scale for these questions differed slightly, with a scale of “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. Our objective with these queries was to ascertain the application of learned skills as demonstrative of emerging leaders: were participants able to directly correlate the learning objectives to outcomes as a result of knowledge development? Were they open to seeking feedback to expand their development as a leader? Finally, were they able to see the relevance of their applying new behaviors via strength identification to a real-world environment?

### ***Values-based Leadership (VBL) Survey***

To ensure consistency of evaluation objectives and measurement criteria, the VBL targeted a similar set of question categories to that of the SBL Survey. Four initial questions focused on: 1) Knowledge development of a values-based approach to leadership and its significance; 2) individual knowledge of values and character strengths as measured using the VIA Character Strengths assessment; 3) the ability to apply Crucial Conversations and GVV tools to manage difficult conversations; and 4) the level of confidence as an emerging leader.

Respondents rate their post-VBL development on the same Likert scale of 1-4 as that of the SBL Survey, indicating a “very high level” (rating: 4), “moderate level” (rating: 3), “low level” (rating: 2), and “non or not at all”, equalling a rating of 1. Again, for evaluation consistency, the questions measured to what degree students gained knowledge of program components/curriculum as applicable to values and character-based strengths, were knowledgeable of their values and character strengths, were able to successfully apply various tools in challenging conversation scenarios, and to what degree their confidence in their leadership skills increased over time.

Students were also asked to provide feedback on six additional questions that assessed whether learning objectives (knowledge and skill development, application of said skills) were met. These included questions focused on whether the students found the breakout session beneficial towards leadership development, if students were planning to apply their key learnings to critical conversations and to make an impact in a real-world scenario (academic, personal, professional), and if confidence levels in their strengths and how to apply them had increased.

### ***Post-Program/End-of-program Survey***

The final participant survey was administered two months after the end of the VBL sessions and Cohort Meetings, on May 24, 2018 via email using the participants' registration roster, achieving a 30% return rate (19 of 63 participants). Designed as a post-program evaluation, the survey considered all aspects of program and classroom management, including class environment, relevance of curriculum/content to personal/professional goals, efficacy of activities and exercises in aiding learning, whether adequate time was dedicated to practicing leadership skills, strengths/talents, and character strengths, and if the overall program was worth the participant's time and engagement.

The survey questions were measured on a Likert scale of 1-4, with 1=Strongly Agree and 4 = Strongly Disagree (note, this differed from the previous Post-Seminar/Breakout sessions Surveys in sequencing).

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Post-Program Survey (May 24, 2018)***

Overall, findings from the program evaluations/surveys reflected extremely positive results in most categories that were assessed. Of particular note were the consistencies between

post-SBL, post-VBL, and post-program (final) evaluation results. Ninety-five percent of students either strongly agreed or agreed that the program was worth their time and engagement. Furthermore, 94.4% noted the topics and skills were relevant to their personal, academic, and professional goals.

In cross-group comparisons of Breakout sessions (when students were divided into pre-selected groups, with each group assigned a faculty member and two Student Mentors), every group with one exception (no responses reported) had a 94.7 – 100% strongly agree or agree when assessing faculty and Student mentors' knowledge, enthusiasm, and support.

As indicated in open-ended comments on the post-Program Survey, students were able to clearly verbalize their anticipated learning outcomes (application of learned skills) they hoped to achieve as a result of their learning efforts, which correlated with expected program objectives, noting:

“I hope that I take into account my strengths and values and use those to further myself and others” (*Program objective: self-confidence, courage to motivate students to lead; build future leaders who make a difference*)

“[I hope to] become a great leader” (*Program objectives: help students develop their leader identity; self-confidence, courage*)

“More confidence in myself and being able to showcase my strengths” (*Program objective: self-confidence, courage*)

“To become better at interviews” (*Program objective: enable students to identify and develop strengths*)

“Able to communicate better with my group mates” (*Program objective: enable students to identify and develop strengths*)

“Become a leader in a student organization fall semester and obtain a leadership role this summer during my internship” (*Program objectives: help students develop their leader identity; introduce roles, tasks and responsibilities of leaders at all levels*)

### ***Post-SBL Seminar/Breakout Sessions (January 26, 2018)***

The post-SBL Seminar/Breakout session Survey presented a range of scores across all categories and all respondents from 3.33 – 3.85 on a 4.0 scale (with 4 being the highest/most effective). The survey response rate was 72% (46 respondents of 64 participants). The highest rating fell in the second category, with students developing knowledge of their top five themes/strengths (3.85). Given the degree to which students expressed satisfaction in gaining self-awareness related to their individual strengths, this finding is not surprising. The next highest-ranked category was the participants’ beliefs that the ULP would have positive benefits around their leadership development (3.74), with a majority of students intending to solicit feedback for improvement on their strengths (3.63). An average of 3.65 indicated students have a clear understanding of how strengths and goal-achievement are linked, which is reflective of the efficacy of the program curriculum and learning activities in the breakout sessions. Perhaps most importantly, students were able to increase their confidence as a leader (3.33), one of the major tenets of the program. This is reflected in Table 1.



**Table 1. Post-SBL Seminar/Breakout Session Survey Results**

<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>Very High Level</b>	<b>Moderate Level</b>	<b>Low Level</b>	<b>None or Not at All</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Average</b>
Knowledge of a Strengths-based approach to leadership	30	15	1		46.00	3.63
Knowledge of my top 5 themes/strengths	39	7			46.00	3.85
Understand how to apply my strengths to achieve my goals	30	16			46.00	3.65
Recognize the strengths of others (strengths spotting)	23	21	2		46.00	3.46
Confidence as a leader	17	27	2		46.00	3.33
<b>Category</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Average</b>
I believe this program will have positive benefits for me personally as a leader	34	12			46.00	3.74
I will seek feedback on my Top 5 Themes	29	17			46.00	3.63
I am able to apply what I've learned immediately to make a difference in a team, organization or job	23	21	2		46.00	3.46

***Post-VBL Seminar/Breakout Sessions (March 2, 2018)***

The post-VBL seminar and Breakout session survey highlighted findings consistent with the post-Program and post-SBL sessions. Overall, students regarded the VBL Breakout sessions as valuable for their leadership development (3.85). The range of scores across all categories was 3.67 – 3.86 on a 4.0 scale, with the highest-rated categories centered on knowledge development of the VBL approach, and an understanding of how to apply Crucial conversations and GVV tools. Moreover, respondents made clear their ability to apply learned knowledge to their respective goals. Students indicated a higher level of confidence than in the post-SBL survey (3.70 vs. 3.33), which may reflect a growing level of confidence overall, or a higher degree of confidence in the values-based learning knowledge versus strengths-based learning (3.85 vs.

3.46). In both cases, however, given the high ratings averages, we consider the application component of leadership development to be successful. This can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2. Post-VBL Seminar/Breakout Session Survey Results**

<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>Very High Level</b>	<b>Moderate Level</b>	<b>Low Level</b>	<b>None or Not at All</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Average</b>
Knowledge of a Values-based approach to leadership and its importance	29	3.5	0.5	0	33.00	3.86
Knowledge of my values and character strengths (VIA)	26	6.5	0.5	0	33.00	3.77
Understand how to apply the Crucial Conversations and GVV tools to be more successful with difficult conversations (Plan, Script, Practice, Feedback)	29	3.5	0.5	0	33.00	3.86
Confidence as a leader	23	10	0	0	33.00	3.70
<b>Question</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Average</b>
I believe today's cohort meeting has provided positive benefits for my leadership development	28	5	0	0	33.00	3.85
I will apply what I learned to a specific crucial conversation that I need/want to have	28	5	0	0	33.00	3.85
I am able to apply what I've learned immediately to make a difference in my life - academic, personal, professional	26	7	0	0	33.00	3.79
My confidence to tackle difficult conversations and situations has improved	23	9	1	0	33.00	3.67
Overall, I have more knowledge of my strengths and how to apply them in my leadership role(s)	26	7	0	0	33.00	3.79
Overall, I have more confidence in my strengths and how to apply them in my leadership role(s)	23	10	0	0	33.00	3.70

## DISCUSSION

In assessing the overall effectiveness of the ULP, it was encouraging to note the components that were identified as positive/beneficial by the student participants. Overall, it was clearly evident that students benefited from their participation, and that the learning outcomes included achievement at the individual and group level of increased confidence, linked to character traits, and improved courage which link directly to their development as emerging leaders. Overall, students developed knowledge of both a Strengths-based and Values-based approach to leadership. They expanded their knowledge of their top strengths, values, and character strengths through self-assessment and in-seminar/session activities at the individual and group level. They became well-versed in understanding how to apply strengths to achieve personal and professional goals, while simultaneously managing difficult conversations and recognizing the strengths of others. Their level of confidence as a leader increased with subsequent practice in activities and “real-world” scenarios.

In summarizing what went well with the program, we have concluded:

1. The Curriculum/Program Components are strong, as evidenced by high evaluation scores in post-program Survey questions focused on activities/exercises and strengths-based development. In addition, the tools and frameworks provided in the Breakout sessions (SBL: Strengths spotting, Strength Wheel; VBL: Crucial Conversations, GVV) were found to be extremely helpful, with 95% - 100% of respondents indicating this for the SBL Sessions and 77.7%-95% for the VBL sessions.
2. The interactive and personalized learning sessions (Breakouts) were deemed to be the most effective mechanism for students to understand and operationalize their strengths/talents and character strengths. With the exception of one category (adequate

practice time) which was rated “moderate” to “low”, 95%-100% of respondents for the SBL Survey indicated that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the program was relevant to their goals.

3. The participation, facilitation, support, and overall performance of Student Mentors was rated very highly. Student mentors were deemed highly enthusiastic, knowledgeable, communicated the right amount, and effectively supported student learning with ratings ranging from 1.16 - 1.41 on a 4.0 scale (with 1.0 = strongly agree).
4. Faculty were also assessed as knowledgeable and enthusiastic, with scores ranging from 1.38 - 1.46 on a 4.0 scale (with 1.0 = strongly agree).

Upon further review of areas for improvement, we intend to focus on the following key themes: 1) enhanced recruiting and marketing/communication regarding the ULP; 2) Expansion of in-session learning activities and opportunities for applied practice/hands-on practice by participants; 3) Increased accountability around support/collaboration; 4) Inclusion of a follow-up Cohort meeting (in spring) and “Lessons Applied” meeting in the fall, requiring participation by all students; 5) solicitation of feedback from Student Mentors regarding training gaps.

Regarding communication, we will focus on two aspects: 1) creating more consistent, timely, and schedule communication between Program Administration to student participants, and between Student Mentors and Students; and 2) developing a post-program newsletter or messaging mechanisms with reminders to participants about key insights/what they learned. The former is already being implemented for Phase 2 in spring 2019 as required/scheduled Mentor-Student “office hours”. Because of the success of the overall program, the curriculum will be maintained in its current iteration, but learning activities, buddy pairings, icebreakers, and hands-on practice exercises will be increased and refined to encourage support and collaboration. In

addition, both a final capstone session of the spring program, as well as a “returners event” in the fall will be implemented in 2019, to provide closure and celebration, as well as reconnection after the students have had the summer to apply their newly-acquired leadership skills. Finally, we have implemented steps to conduct a survey to be completed by the Student Mentors with the spring 2019 session regarding their own efficacy, training and knowledge gaps, and points for additional development in their role.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Our remaining focus is on improving the ULP for future student participants, mentors, and faculty. In that regard, our next steps will include:

1. Focusing on expanding the program recruitment to accommodate 900-1200 students annually; this will necessitate the development of additional strategic marketing, recruiting, and communication channels. One consideration is the incorporation of a well-known Leadership Speaker (executive or other leader to speak to the themes of the ULP on Confidence, Character & Courage) during the Fall kick-off session.
2. Increasing the amount of trained faculty facilitators, changing the role of the faculty to that of facilitation for Seminars, with Student Mentors serving as facilitators for Breakout sessions in addition to Cohort meetings.
3. Launching a detailed training program for Faculty and recruiting future ULP staff from “The Business School” to ensure their maximum effectiveness in Seminar facilitation. This would continue to include training in Clifton StrengthsFinder, VIA Character Strengths, Crucial Conversations, and Giving Voice to Values (GVV). Leadership curriculum is more effective when it integrates academic coursework and experiential exercises with a common theoretical framework (CAS, 2012; Osteen & Coburn, 2012;

Owen, 2012; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000). Regarding knowledge influences, core faculty to be informed of current leadership theories and the requisite leadership skills in order to provide a structure for an effective student leadership development program. Additionally, the literature asserts that programs are more impactful when faculty members understand how undergraduate students create a leadership identity during their academic career. With this knowledge, faculty can create and promote both formal and informal learning opportunities to advance and assess undergraduates' leadership capacity to address the challenges facing organizations and society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

4. Encouraging additional institutional buy-in through UPL Administrative leadership. At the organizational level, recent research has shown that resources need to be effectively coordinated to provide the time, education and coordination, feedback and meaningful assessment process for faculty to devote their time and effort to a new leadership initiative. Long term sustainability relies on faculty being supported, recognized and rewarded in establishing new or revised leadership program as well as tangible and intangible symbols of support across campus (Osteen & Coburn, 2012; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000). Building the leadership capacity of students effectively is a collaborative endeavor that requires commitment across the institution.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, the Undergraduate Leadership Program (ULP) developed for “The Business School” has been shown to be highly effective, relevant, and necessary to student leadership development. Grounded in Strengths-based leadership and Values-based character strengths, undergraduate students are able to leverage their self-awareness to identify key talents, values,

and character strengths, spot strengths in others, apply relevant and practical tools to enhance their leadership skills, and increase their confidence in leadership roles. We remain optimistic that the Program will continue to achieve both its program objectives and learning objectives, in its drive to develop student leaders for the 21st century and beyond.

## **APPENDIX A: Program Timing (2017-2018)**

### ***Launch: Cohort 1 - spring 2018 (January - September 2018)***

- November 2017 - Orientation/kickoff program for Student Mentors
- January 4-5, 2018– Faculty Training on Strength-Based Leadership
- January 12, 2018 - Initial meeting with students (mini-orientation)
- January 26, 2018 – Strengths-Based Leadership Seminar
- February 6, 2018 – Cohort meeting 1
- February 22, 2018 – Faculty Training on Values-Based Leadership
- March 2, 2018 – Values-Based Leadership Seminar
- Late March 2018 – Cohort Meeting 2
- Summer 2018 – students put into practice skills/development
- September 14, 2018 – Cohort Meeting 3 as follow-up



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